Unit .25

Session .02

Jesus Tells the Parable of the Sons

Scripture

Luke 15:11-13,17-32

11 He also said: "A man had two sons. **12** The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate I have coming to me.' So he distributed the assets to them. **13** Not many days later, the younger son gathered together all he had and traveled to a distant country, where he squandered his estate in foolish living. … **17** When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food, and here I am dying of hunger! **18** I'll get up, go to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. **19** I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired workers."' **20** So he got up and went to his father. But while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him. **21** The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.' **22** "But the father told his servants, 'Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. **23** Then bring the fattened calf and slaughter it, and let's celebrate with a feast, **24** because this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' So they began to celebrate. **25** "Now his older son was in the field; as he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. **26** So he summoned one of the servants, questioning what these things meant. **27** 'Your brother is here,' he told him, 'and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' **28** "Then he became angry and didn't want to go in. So his father came out and pleaded with him. **29** But he replied to his father, 'Look, I have been slaving many years for you, and I have never disobeyed your orders, yet you never gave me a goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. **30** But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.' **31** "'Son,' he said to him, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. **32** But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Main Point:
God's love and forgiveness extends to any who repents of their sin and self-righteousness.

Intro Options

Option 1

Write three S-words from today's lesson on the board:

- Selfishness
- Sorrow
- Self-righteousness

Then write "What's next?" next to the list.

Tell your students to create either a skit (in groups) or a comic strip (by themselves) answering the "what's next" question. They should choose one of the three S-words and then create a brief story showing what might come about as a result of these feelings.

Once they've done their skits or shown their drawings, write the R-words from today's lesson after each S-word:

- Selfishness —>Rebellion
- Sorrow —> Repentance
- Self-righteousness —> Resentment

If students want to, they can do a quick improv scene showing how the second concept might flow from the first. Point out that in today's lesson, we'll see how these three S-words lead to the three R-words.

Option 2

Your kids should imagine that they run a sketch comedy show on a Christian TV/YouTube/Social Media channel (maybe they could call themselves Sunday Morning Live). Their job is to come up with a series of short, funny vignette skits to make people laugh around the following two topics:

- Good responses to "goodness"
- Bad responses to "goodness"

For example, a bad response to goodness might be arrogance; a good response to goodness might be passing the goodness along. In the first instance, a student might act all cocky after getting elected class president; in the second instance, a person might share some of the cookies they found as a surprise in their lunchbox.

Give students time to make a few skits/sketches and then to show them. Point out that in today's lesson we'll see two bad responses to goodness and one good response. Specifically, we'll see how some people respond to God's goodness with selfishness, rebellion, self-righteousness, and resentment; we'll also see how people respond to God's goodness with sorrow and repentance (which ultimately leads to joy).

TEACHING PLAN

Read Luke 15:11-13.

Jesus didn't give us any backstory to the relationship between the younger son and his father. Was it tumultuous? Was it hostile? Jesus didn't tell us, but the small detail He did give us in the introduction is actually a big clue. By asking for his inheritance early, the younger son was essentially saying to his father, "I wish you were dead." Today's equivalent would be a teenager spitting in his dad's face and screaming, "I want you dead!" He wanted what his father could give him now, even at the expense of their relationship.

In verse 13, Jesus said the inheritance the younger son took early in his greed was "squandered." He said that the lifestyle of the son was "foolish." Whatever experience or possession the son was chasing in his new life came up short in reality. The imagery here (and afterward) is stark. The son, as we will see, lost everything. It's strange to think he couldn't have seen it coming. Maybe he was foolishly telling himself he could turn everything around. Maybe the highs of his rebellious living were too addictive. In any event, we see that living with yourself at the center is to live spiritually bankrupt and sets yourself up for a life of catastrophic emptiness.

- **Think of when you got something you'd wanted for a long time only to find it didn't satisfy. Why didn't it deliver on the promise?**

Read Luke 15:17-24.

As we see in this next section, the prodigal son had bottomed out. He was not just at the end of his money and wild lifestyle but at the end of himself. Interestingly enough, this journey is sometimes necessary in one's coming to Christ. The circumstances may look different for each of us, but until we despair of ourselves, we will not see the beauty of Christ's fullness given to us in the gospel.

- **Like the prodigal son, have you realized that the things of this world do not give us lasting fulfillment, and that lasting fulfillment can only be found in Jesus? If so, what were the circumstances surrounding that realization?**

The crucial moment in Jesus' story occurred as the son approached his hometown. Jesus said that the father saw his son while he was still a long way off. In other words, the father had been watching diligently, hoping to catch a glimpse of his son. Through it all, the father had not stopped loving his child. He hoped to see their relationship restored. His eagerness to see his younger son again drove him time after time to the front of the yard, where he stared into the distance to see if maybe today would be the day his boy would be on his way home.

- **Make a list of several characteristics communicated by the father's actions in this parable. How are these characteristics also true of God?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God's love and forgiveness extends to any who repents of their sin and self-righteousness.

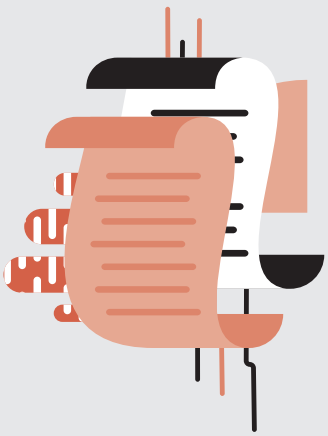
Luke 15

11-13. The three parables in Luke 15 (lost sheep, lost coin, lost son) were told in an environment that heightened the drama of their stories. The religious leaders were complaining about Jesus welcoming notorious sinners to His table. In response, Jesus didn't give an explanation but told a series of stories, with the third one especially pointed—casting God the Father in the role of the loving father and His opponents in the role of a resentful elder brother.

Hundreds of years before Jesus told this story, the teacher of Ecclesiastes gave us a philosophical background for it. Apparently the reflections of an elderly Solomon note how often he declared the heights of his pleasure-seeking and the peaks of his accumulation as nothing more than vapor, smoke, a "chasing the wind." Once you catch it, it vanishes in your hands. The pursuit, at the end of it all, proves fruitless, worthless, and empty.

What was true for Solomon and true for the prodigal is true for us today—sin is turning from the satisfaction of God to the prospect of satisfying ourselves with things God has made. It is choosing the gift over the Giver. It is living as if we are the lords of our own hearts and the sovereigns of our own kingdoms. When we choose sin, in fact, it is choosing to live as if our heavenly Father is no longer alive.

17-24. Some have said that the most significant character in the parable of the lost son is the father. He corresponds to our heavenly Father, who overflows with loving-kindness to all generations, whose love is steadfast and equally abundant in riches to younger and older brothers, the rebellious and the religious. The father in the story, like our heavenly Father, operates on the kingdom economy, not the world's. When the lost son returns, he imprudently runs to greet him. And then he throws a party—for the kid who wished his father were dead, who shook his fist at him with a shameful spending spree during his exile! Like the joy for the found sheep and the found coin, the joy for the found son seems disproportionate to the occasion. And it is, if your heart, like the older brother's heart, is set to law, not gospel.



99 Essential Doctrines (p. 16, DDG)

God is Gracious

God's nature is to delight in giving unmerited favor to those who are undeserving (Eph. 2:8-9). His grace toward sinners is found most clearly in the salvation He has provided through Christ. Because of sin, humanity is undeserving of salvation—all of us have turned our backs on God, and as a result, we deserve death (Rom. 6:23). However, instead of leaving people in their sins, God has demonstrated His graciousness by providing atonement and forgiveness for our sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus (2 Cor. 5:21).

TEACHING PLAN

Jesus said that when the father finally saw the son at the edge of the village, he pulled up his robe and ran to him. In Middle Eastern culture, running was considered shameful for someone in a position of honor, but that didn't stop this father. The son spoke, acknowledging his sin against his God and his father, rightly admitting that he was unworthy to be a son once more. He understood his unworthiness to be part of the family and receive such love. He recognized the weight and depth of his sin and the shame and agony his father experienced because of it. He was truly repentant. And the father responded by accepting the boy back as a son and not as a servant.

- **How does it make you feel knowing that God graciously forgives when you repent from your sin?**

Read Luke 15:25-32.

Jesus described how the older son responded to people celebrating his brother's return. In Jesus' culture, any older son would be expected to hightail into the house and join the feast as quickly as possible. Instead, the older son stayed outside, choosing to murmur about the apparent unfairness of his father's actions. He deemed the party unworthy of his attendance.

You see, Jesus painted a picture of two types of lost people. The first is openly rebellious—the "in your face" sin of the younger son. The younger son's request illustrates the enormity and consequence of human sin. "God, we want what You can give us, but we don't want You!" The second is a more subtle type of sinner—seen in the older son. He represents someone who appears to be near God but is actually far away. He's the church member who wants God's blessing but could care less about God's name being honored or about glorifying God with his life. He doesn't care about his father or his brother—only about himself and what he can get out of the situation.

Just as the father went out to meet his prodigal son, he went out to convince his puffed up and arrogant older son to come in and celebrate his brother's return. In essence, the loving father had two sons who blocked his love in different ways. The younger one had walled himself off from the father's love by doing evil, while the older one walled himself off from that same love by doing "good." The older brother went through the motions so he could gain rights in the household, not true membership in the family. The younger brother—the repentant rebel—was inside feasting while the older brother—the "good" son—stayed outside pouting.

- **How can our "good deeds" be a way of walling ourselves off from a relationship with God?**

Jesus ended the parable as a cliffhanger, leaving the audience waiting for the story's resolution: Did the older brother go in and join the family celebration? By doing so, we are invited to examine our own hearts to determine which of the two brothers we identify with—the younger rebellious one, or the older rule-following one. Will we turn from our rebellious living and turn back to the Father whose presence and love is what we long for? Will we enter the house of God and become a part of God's family? Or will we stay out in the field, appearing close to God while we are actually far from His heart? Whichever way we lean, Jesus invites us in to celebrate the Father's warm embrace.

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God's love and forgiveness extends to any who repents of their sin and self-righteousness.

Luke 15

25-32. In a brilliant way, Jesus was suggesting a fulfillment to a familial dysfunction at work throughout the biblical generations, particularly between older brothers and younger brothers. According to Jewish custom, the oldest son is first in line when it comes to honor and legacy. However, throughout the Old Testament, family after family shows us the younger brothers outwitting, outlasting, and outshining the older brothers. The failure of the older brother to live up to his honorable position begins with Cain, proceeds through Esau to Joseph's brothers and to David's brothers, and culminates in the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. It is not that the younger siblings are all that great themselves, but one way God reinforces His penchant for shaming the wise with the foolish and the strong with the weak (1 Cor. 1:27) is by making the older serve the younger (Gen. 25:23, Rom. 9:12).

However, it is also worth pointing out that there is a big difference between the third story and the first two in Luke 15. In the accompanying parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep, it is interesting that someone goes looking for the lost items. In the lost-son parable, however, nobody goes (certainly not the older brother). Nevertheless, Jesus is the good older brother who does go out and seek the lost in order to rescue them. Contrasting with the older brother in this narrative, Jesus willingly goes to great pains to not only restore lost prodigal children, but also provides the means for them to return home and be restored with the Father.

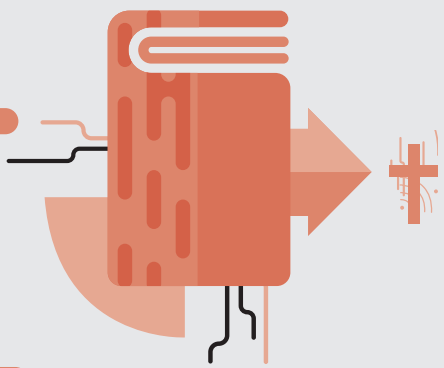
Activity

This activity will have two parts. For part 1, students should create a skit or a poster on how to identify "that guy." They should create some kind of "public service announcement" to help people identify an "odd" or "unique" person. These should humorous, not degrading. Allow them to create and then show their "how identify that guy" public service announcement. Next, randomly assign each group or individual to take the "that guy" description from another group. They must now create a skit or poster public service announcement on "how to include 'that guy.'"

Today's lesson was about how God's goodness receives any sinner back home; as the church, we have to model his receptive grace for any person. Give them time to make their PSAs and see what they come up with. Point out that to God, we were way worse than "that guy" ever will be to us, and Jesus still died for us. Real grace really is amazing.

(p. 18, DDG) Christ Connection

The Pharisees and scribes criticized Jesus for welcoming sinners and dining with them. In response, Jesus told a story of a father longing for and celebrating his wayward son's return. This story illustrates God's joy over sinners coming to repentance and trusting in Jesus, the Savior, who came to seek and save the lost.



THE PARABLE OF THE SONS

Luke 15:11–13, 17–32

THE PARABLE OF THE SONS

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JESUS CONNECTION

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LIFEWISE QUALITY

JOY – Having a cheerful response, regardless of my circumstances.

HEAD

What did the younger son do with his inheritance? Why did he return home?

How did the father and older son respond differently when the younger son returned home?

HEART

We tend to think that getting or doing whatever we want is the path to joy, but often we end up lost, broken, and far from God. What is something you wanted for a long time and finally got, only to find it didn't satisfy you as much as you thought it would? Why didn't it bring you the happiness you hoped for?

In Jesus' story, both sons were actually lost. The younger son sinned through disobedience, but the older son sinned by trusting in his own actions to save himself. Both were far away from God. Which son do you most identify with? How might this distance from God affect your ability to experience true joy?

HANDS

If possible, listen to the song "Better" by Pat Barrett, or read the lyrics below. Make a collage by drawing (or cutting out and gluing) pictures on a paper or poster of the things mentioned in the song that we believe will bring us joy. At the top of your paper, write "JESUS IS BETTER" in large letters. Hang the collage where you can see it every day to remind yourself that true joy is only found in Jesus.

"Better," Pat Barret

All the money that the world could hold
Mountains made of solid gold
Riches that could buy my dreams
You are better than all these things
The prettiest face to turn their eyes
Beauty that could hypnotize
The open doors that looks may bring
You are better than all these things
Your love is better than life
You are the well that won't run dry
I have tasted and I have seen
Oh, You are better than all these things
Power that could shake the moon
Most important one in the room
Status matched by only kings
You are better than all these things
Your love is better than life
You are the well that won't run dry
I have tasted and I have seen
You are better than all of these things
Being liked and loved by everyone
Approval that outshines the sun
Cheered by all who think of me
You are better than all these things
Your love is better than life
You are the well that won't run dry
I have tasted and I have seen
You are better than all these things
You are better than I can imagine,
Over, above what I seek
Better than I can imagine, Your love for me
You are better than I can imagine,
over, above what I seek in life
You are better than all these things

Comparison is a joy-killer. When the older son compared how his brother was treated (with a party) to how he was treated (all work, no party), he was angry, not joyful, that his lost brother was found. Think of someone you tend to compare yourself with or have been angry about the differences in how you were both treated. Every day this week, choose to pray for that person and ask God to help you celebrate with them instead of comparing yourself to them.